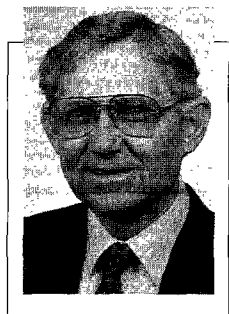


# The *Desire of Ages* project: the data

Part 1 of a two-part series

Fred Veltman

**How dependent on sources was Ellen White in the writing of *The Desire of Ages*? What sources did she use, how did she use them, and through what process was that book written?**



When he was commissioned to do this research project, Fred Veltman, Ph.D., was the chairman of the Religion Department of Pacific Union College, Angwin, California. He continues to teach half-time in that department while chairing a different, newly-formed department.

**T**he fact that Ellen White used literary sources in the production of her writings has been known for more than a century. But in January 1980, Walter Rea, then an Adventist pastor in southern California, presented evidence that Ellen White's literary dependency was greater than had been recognized previously. The nature and scope of her literary borrowing, however, particularly for any given book other than *The Great Controversy*, was still a matter of speculation. How much verbatim material was there in her writings, especially her narrative, descriptive, and theological commentaries on Scripture? To what degree was she dependent upon literary sources? Do her comments reflect the influence of other writers? From what writers did she borrow and from what kind of books? Did Ellen White do the copying herself, or was it done by her literary assistants? Could she have unconsciously used the literary expressions of other authors — did she have a “photographic” memory?

These and similar issues had to be addressed before one could treat the charge of plagiarism leveled against Ellen White, and the questions being raised over the nature of her inspiration.

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists sponsored an in-depth investigation into Ellen White's use of literary sources in writing *The Desire of Ages*. The research, which spread over a period of almost eight years and involved the equivalent of five years of full-time work, was completed about two years

ago. Adventist colleges and universities throughout the world received copies of the full report on this in-depth study. All of the Ellen G. White Estate research centers also carry a copy of the final document.<sup>1</sup>

Space requirements dictate that my comments focus on the conclusions of the investigation. But for the benefit of those readers who may not be acquainted with the study, I will briefly touch on its textual base and methodology. And for those who may be interested in my own reaction to the results of the research, a personal postscript accompanies the concluding article of this series.<sup>2</sup> I make no attempt here to document or argue the evidence supporting the conclusions.

## **The Ellen White textual base**

*The Desire of Ages* includes both narrative and theological commentary. Nearly every chapter is based upon a portion of Scripture. If Adventists were concerned about Ellen White's use of sources, this book, perhaps the best-loved of all her writings, was the obvious text to study.

Ellen White's motivation to write *The Desire of Ages* stemmed from her desire to prepare a more complete and accurate portrayal of the life of Christ than was contained in *The Spirit of Prophecy*, volumes 2 and 3, a new book that Adventist colporteurs could sell to the public. For nearly 40 years she wrote on this subject, finally having *The Desire of Ages* published in 1898. She became so caught up in the subject that she produced enough material to fill two additional books, *Christ's Object Lessons* and *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*. Much of what she

ote for *The Desire of Ages* first saw publication as articles in various Adventist journals.

Initially we researchers were assigned to study the entire text of *The Desire of Ages*—all of its 87 chapters and more than 800 pages. We soon found we had neither the time nor the staff to tackle a project of such scope. To reduce the textual base to manageable size, we asked statisticians to select 15 chapters that would serve as a random sample of the full text.<sup>3</sup>

Ellen White did not write *The Desire of Ages* chapter by chapter from scratch. Rather, for the most part it was compiled from her earlier writings. So the pre-1898 unpublished manuscripts and the articles published prior to that year afforded a textual base more representative of her own handiwork. Using the subject matter of the 15 chapters as our control, we searched all the earlier writings of Ellen White to locate the letters, manuscripts, and articles in which she had written on these same subjects. To distinguish these texts from the text of *The Desire of Ages* (DA), we have designated them pre-DA.

### Methodology

We were commissioned to study Ellen White's use of literary sources. For an investigation of this type, the obvious research method is source analysis, or what is commonly called source criticism. In this kind of study, the researchers select literary subunits to serve as the basis for comparing the major text and the possible source texts. They establish criteria to permit them to find the literary units that are parallel and to determine the degree to which the two units resemble each other.

We selected the sentence as the unit of comparison. The 15 chapters of the DA text contained 2,624 sentences, and the pre-DA text furnished 1,180 sentence units.<sup>4</sup>

We also established a scale of seven levels of dependency. The criteria differentiating between these levels of dependency were the amount of verbatim words and the order of the elements in the sentences. For instance, if a sentence from an Ellen White text was in every respect identical to one in a source text, we labeled it "strict verbatim" and gave it a dependency value of seven. In cases where the sentences were identical except that an obvious synonym had been substituted for a word, we identified the

sentence as "verbatim" and gave it a value of six—indicating that it had a lesser degree of dependency than "strict verbatim" with its value of seven.

When the Ellen White text and the source were identical because both writers were depending directly on Scripture, we labeled the sentence "Bible quotation" and gave it a dependency rating of zero. When there was no clear indication of literary dependency, we called the sentence "independent" and gave it a dependency value of zero—even when the content of her DA text was very similar to that of a source text.<sup>5</sup>

Literary dependency is not limited to parallel sentence structure and verbal similarities. Authors may also consult sources for the arrangement of the sentences and the thematic development of a chapter. So our analysis of the DA text included a study of possible editorial or redactional dependency.

In our investigation we examined more than 500 works, mostly nineteenth-century works on the life of Christ. Of course, Ellen White was not limited to this type of literature when she wrote on the life of Christ. She also had access to sermons, devotional books, Bible society tracts, Bible commentaries, and general Christian literature, and could have borrowed materials from any of these sources. In view of the fact that we did not review all the life-of-Christ materials available to Ellen White, much less the literature from other genres she is known to have read, there is no way this probe could be called complete or exhaustive. So the reader must consider the summations and conclusions that follow as minimal if not tentative findings, even though we made every possible effort to conduct a thorough and careful study.

### Summations

From the outset of the study and throughout its long course I constantly faced questions relating to the conclusions. What do you think you will discover? Will you be able to report the results of your study without having your ministerial credentials revoked? Will the church publicize your findings? Have you changed your views on Ellen White? Do you still believe that she was inspired? Did her secretaries do the copying? Did you find any disagreement between her writings and Scripture? Do you think a believer has any right to look for sources behind inspired writings? Do you think the writers she used were inspired?

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**Marian Davis  
compiled Ellen  
White's earlier  
writings on Christ's  
life into scrapbook  
form. It was from this  
collection that the  
DA text was  
developed.**

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While these inquiries were appropriate and appreciated, they were not the issues troubling me. I had other concerns. How could we approach the analysis of the textual data fairly and consistently? How accurate would our conclusions be when based upon a random sample consisting of 15 chapters of varying length, content, and source dependency? Could our conclusions serve as valid generalizations about the entire text of *The Desire of Ages* and Ellen White's method of writing her books, particularly her commentaries on the great controversy between good and evil as covered in Scripture?<sup>6</sup>

My solution was to study each chapter in terms of its own special nature. I hoped that I would be able to let the data determine the questions to be asked, and I endeavored to be open to any new insights, even new perplexities, that might emerge from the analysis. In the end I developed a list of 14 questions that I asked in regard to each chapter. I hoped that these questions would help to keep my analysis focused and consistent despite variations in the text and possible changes in my outlook as the study progressed.

In what follows, I present the 14 questions and the corresponding summary statements derived from our analysis of the 15 chapters. The statements, of course, present in abbreviated form what is more fully laid out in chapter XVIII of the report. The questions and answers offer further clarification on the nature

## It became very clear to us that it was Ellen White herself who was copying from the sources.

and scope of the study and largely form the evidence supporting the five general concluding statements that I give in the second article.

### 1. Do we have any original (handwritten) manuscripts of Ellen White on the DA text?

No chapters have been located in either handwritten or copy form. Several sentences from three chapters have been found in Ellen White's diaries, and significant portions of three additional chapters were developed from manuscripts dating from 1897. Handwritten and copied texts exist for portions of the pre-DA text, treating the content of 10 of the 15 chapters.

### 2. Does the DA text represent an increase or a reduction in the coverage of topics Ellen White treated in her earlier works? And if she enlarged her coverage, is the expansion to be accounted for by a greater dependency on sources?

No consistent answer emerges. Some topics receive more attention, and others less. Where the commentary has been extended, we also find more independent material. The DA text generally represents a lesser degree of dependency than does the pre-DA text, and the longer chapters of DA show no greater use of sources than do the shorter ones.

### 3. How does the content of the DA text compare in general with the content of Ellen White's earlier writings on the life of Christ? Can we detect any influence of the sources on the content?

Doing source analysis involves giving some consideration to content, but finding a definitive answer to this question would require a separate study. Generally

speaking, there is strong agreement between the later and earlier writings except where the earlier text needed revision. No doubt much of the agreement results from the use of the same sources for both the earlier and later writings. The DA text manifests a stronger spiritual appeal, no doubt because of the evangelistic purpose that motivated and guided its production.

### 4. Are there any significant differences between the DA text and the pre-DA text?

Differences appear in the order of events in the life of Christ, in how the two texts harmonize the Scripture accounts, and in DA's exclusion of some extrabiblical stories contained in the pre-DA text. No doubt the sources influenced to some degree the chronology of Ellen White's narrative account and the thematic arrangement of some of her chapters in the DA text. It is not always possible to tell when the revision is the result of the source's influence or of a closer reading of the biblical account.

### 5. How much of the DA text reveals literary dependency?

### 6. What is the extent of Ellen White's literary independence in writing DA?

### 7. What is the degree of dependence of the DA text?

Questions 5, 6, and 7 address the basic issue of literary dependency. Of the 15 chapters' 2,624 sentence units, we found 823 (31 percent) to be in some degree clearly dependent upon material appearing in our 500-plus literary sources. We found that 1,612 sentence units (61 percent) showed no verbal similarity to any of the sources we investigated. The average dependency of the 823 dependent sentences rated just a little higher than the level of "loose paraphrase" (3.3).

### 8. What major works were used by Ellen White in writing the DA text?

We found 10 books from which Ellen White drew 10 or more literary parallels per *Desire of Ages* chapter. *The Life of Christ*, by William Hanna, heads the list with 321 source parallels. *Night Scenes of the Bible* and *Walks and Homes of Jesus*, both by Daniel March, come in second with 129 parallel sentences.<sup>8</sup>

Ellen White drew from Hanna's work for nearly every one of the 15 chapters. But she tended not to use the other sources in such a general way, tending rather to draw mostly from a single source for each chapter that we found to be dependent. Which other source she used

varied from chapter to chapter.

### 9. What additional sources contributed to the DA text?

In addition to the major sources, we found that 21 works written by 20 authors had a minor impact on the 15 chapters. Two authors had works in both the major influence and minor influence categories.

### 10. What literary sources were used in the composition of the pre-DA writings?

Marian Davis compiled Ellen White's earlier writings on Christ's life into scrapbook form. It was from this collection that the DA text was developed. As a result of this method of book production, many source parallels appearing in the DA text make their first appearance in these earlier writings. Exceptions to this expected duplication in literary parallels occur when the earlier text is not included in the DA text or when DA treats content not found in the earlier materials.

Our study revealed that the works of Hanna and March figure heavily in the earlier texts that were taken over into DA. In the Ellen White manuscripts on Christ's life that were not used in forming the DA text, there are literary parallels from the works of Frederic Farrar, John Harris, Henry Melvill, Octavius Winslow, and others.<sup>9</sup>

### 11. How does the DA text compare with the pre-DA text in the use of literary sources?

When we first formulated this question, we had planned to evaluate every sentence of the earlier writings, but time and staff limitations prevented such a thorough study. We did examine this earlier material for its use of sources and found that in most cases it showed either the same level or greater levels of literary dependency than did the DA text. Out of the 1,180 sentence units reviewed, we noted 879 dependent sentences. We found 6 strict verbatim sentences, 80 verbatim, 232 strict paraphrase, and 232 simple paraphrase. The average rate of dependency of the pre-DA dependent sentences was 3.57, compared with DA's rate of 3.3.

As we carefully studied the nature and degree of literary dependency of these early materials, which included Ellen White's personal journals, it became very clear to us that it was Ellen White herself who was copying from the sources. We need not look to the work of her secretaries to account for the source

parallels found in her writings.

## 12. How does the content of the dependent sentences compare with that of the independent?

We found no significant differences in content. Both types of sentences include descriptive, devotional, spiritual, and theological commentary and moral exhortation. Both types contain details such as one might expect in an eyewitness account or as having come from a vision. The differences we noted involve the way reality is affirmed and the number of sentences or degree of emphasis given to a particular topic. Ellen White's independent materials often extend the descriptive, spiritual, theological, or devotional commentary. And where the source is suggestive and indefinite as to what took place in the life and ministry of Christ, Ellen White is positive and definite.

## 13. Do the literary or thematic structures of the chapters of the DA text reflect the structural composition of the sources, apart from the common influence of the Bible?

Even though most DA chapters reflect the dominant use of one source, most of them contain parallels from more than one source. So the final compositions exhibit their own overall structures rather than those of any given source.<sup>10</sup> Several chapter sections appear to reflect specific Ellen White manuscripts.

Ellen White's earlier manuscripts do not reflect multiple sources to the extent the DA chapters do. Evidently in writing them she used one source at a time as she worked on a given topic or aspect in Christ's life. When writing on the same topic on another occasion, she generally used a different source. The fact that DA chapters contain literary parallels from multiple sources more likely represents Marian Davis's conflation of several separate Ellen White manuscripts or journal entries than it does Ellen White sitting down with several sources to compose a chapter.

## 14. Are the pre-DA writings dependent on sources for their thematic arrangement?

In most instances her diary entries float freely from topic to topic, not offering extensive comment on any given subject. But where her pre-DA writings treat a topic, they usually follow the thematic development of the source. Particularly is this the case with her later manuscripts. However, we would remind the reader of the differences discussed under

question 12. Though the basic structure of Ellen White's material usually depends upon the source, her emphasis often differs.

Hopefully this brief review of the 14 questions and their answers provides both a useful context and some justification for the few broad conclusions that follow in the second article (in the December issue of *Ministry*). These concluding statements may well apply to the entire text of *The Desire of Ages*, and perhaps to a number of Ellen White's other writings, as well. If not, they are—at least in my judgment—appropriate for the 15 chapters upon which this investigation focused. ■

<sup>1</sup> Two Adventist journals have carried reviews of the report (*Adventist Review*, Sept. 22, 1988; and *South Pacific Record*, Apr. 15, 1989), but to my knowledge, nowhere have the full conclusions been published. For a while copies of the entire report and of the 100-page-long Chapter XVIII, "Summary and Conclusions," were available for purchase from the office of the president of the General Conference. The report is no longer in stock, but one may still purchase a copy of the summary chapter for US\$3.50. Address your inquiry to Dr. Charles Taylor at the General Conference, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600.

<sup>2</sup> Because I was the project director, I am solely responsible for all the evaluations, the interpretation of the data, and the writing of the report. But I could not have carried out the project without the help of many others, most of whom are mentioned in the preface to the report.

<sup>3</sup> The random sample comprised the following chapters: 3, 10, 13, 14, 24, 37, 39, 46, 53, 56, 72, 75, 76, 83, and 84.

<sup>4</sup> In a few instances compound sentences were divided into two independent clauses and evaluated accordingly.

<sup>5</sup> The other levels of dependency were rated as follows: strict paraphrase, 5; simple paraphrase, 4; loose paraphrase, 3; source Bible, 2 (when the Scripture usage reflected the literary source); and partial independence, 1.

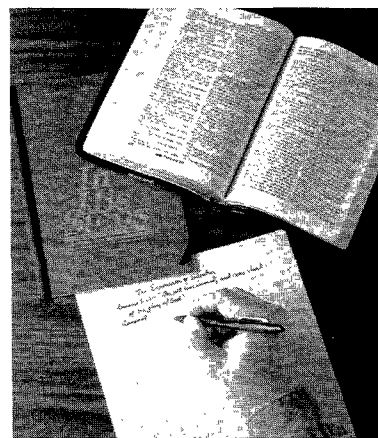
<sup>6</sup> I have in mind here such works as *Patriarchs and Prophets*, *Prophets and Kings*, and *The Acts of the Apostles*.

<sup>7</sup> We arbitrarily chose to classify any source supplying 10 or more literary parallels for any one DA chapter as a "major" literary source.

<sup>8</sup> The other major sources are: John Harris, *The Great Teacher*; Frederic Farrar, *The Life of Christ*; George Jones, *Life-Scenes From the Four Gospels*; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*; J. H. Ingraham, *The Prince of the House of David*; Francis Wayland, *Salvation by Christ*; and John Cumming, *Sabbath Evening Readings on the New Testament: St. John*.

<sup>9</sup> Frederic Farrar, *The Life of Christ*; John Harris, *The Great Teacher*; Henry Melvill, "Jacob's Vision and Vow"; and Octavius Winslow, *The Glory of the Redeemer*.

<sup>10</sup> In combining the two Nazareth visits into one chapter, DA chapter 24 seems to reflect the structure of March. Some evidence exists for arguing that chapters 46 and 76 also depend upon their sources for significant aspects of their literary arrangement.



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# The Desire of Ages project: the conclusions

Part 2 of two

Fred Veltman

**The uniqueness of *The Desire of Ages* is to be found in its practical use of Scripture and its stress on spiritual realities and personal devotion rather than the originality of its content.**



When he was commissioned to do this research project, Fred Veltman, Ph.D., was the chairman of the Religion Department of Pacific Union College, Angwin, California. He continues to teach half-time in that department while chairing a different, newly formed department.

**T**o what degree was Ellen White dependent upon literary sources in writing *The Desire of Ages*? Did she do the copying herself or was it done by her literary assistants? Could she have unconsciously used the literary expressions of other authors—did she have a photographic memory? Our lengthy and detailed investigation led to five general conclusions that cast light upon these broad questions posed in the introduction to the study. The conclusions are based primarily but not exclusively on the answers generated by the 14 questions we addressed to each chapter of *The Desire of Ages* (DA) text.<sup>1</sup> They also include interpretations of the data, and to that degree involve personal judgment. I have tried, however, to separate my opinion from what I would argue the evidence indicates to be a fact.

I have attempted to set forth the five concluding statements in as concise a manner as accuracy would allow. To understand properly the meaning intended, the reader should give careful consideration to the accompanying explanations and supporting arguments, brief as they are.

As is true of most research activities, the process of drawing conclusions raised additional issues that in my view call for further study. I hope that the underscoring of these issues will challenge some readers to add their efforts to those of myself and others who have tried to shed more light on Ellen White's work and writings. It should be clearly understood that these questions are not offered to

dilute the reasonableness of the arguments or to suggest that this investigation is incomplete, and that therefore its conclusions are invalid.

## 1. Ellen White used literary sources when writing *The Desire of Ages*.

The purpose of this fundamental claim, and for many an obvious truth, is to set forth clearly the following facts. It is of first importance to note that Ellen White herself, not her literary assistants, composed the basic content of the DA text. In doing so she was the one who took literary expressions from the works of other authors without giving them credit as her sources.<sup>2</sup> Second, it should be recognized that Ellen White used the writings of others consciously and intentionally. The literary parallels are not the result of accident or photographic memory.

In view of the fact that she employed editorial assistants, our clearest evidence of Ellen White's literary borrowing comes from her personal diaries and manuscripts. If we want to establish more precisely the degree of literary dependence, it would be well to study the manuscripts as they come from her hand, comparing both the dependent and independent sentences. Each manuscript should be treated as a whole. When we take the chapter as the basic unit of composition, we remove ourselves several steps from Ellen White's basic work.

This first and fundamental conclusion never fails to elicit a further inquiry as to its implications. Implicitly or explicitly, Ellen White and others speaking on her behalf did not admit to and even denied literary dependency on her part.<sup>3</sup> In the

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## The issue that concerned her was the authority and truth of her messages—not their originality.

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light of this study and other similar studies, what are we to make of such denials? I think that any attempt to address this problem should include a serious consideration of Ellen White's understanding of inspiration and of her role as a prophet. Such a study should be contextualized in terms of nineteenth-century views on inspiration, especially within Adventism.

### 2. The content of Ellen White's commentary on the life and ministry of Christ, *The Desire of Ages*, is for the most part derived rather than original.

In light of the data our source studies on the DA text provided, this conclusion might appear to some readers as being unjustified.<sup>4</sup> To those who have been told that literary sources played a minimal role in Ellen White's compositions such a statement may be incredible. Obviously this second general conclusion calls for some clarification.

As I explained in the first article, source dependency involves more than verbal parallels. We must consider not only the DA text as it reads today, but also Ellen White's earlier writings, the thematic structure of her writings, and the content of her material even where no direct literary similarity exists. When we do so, we find that she depended on her sources to a much greater degree than the verbal similarities of the DA text to those sources indicate.

We must not place too much weight upon arguments from silence. But it is worthy of note that the DA material that we classified as independent was often

material dealing with topics not usually covered in a work on the life of Christ. Since our study was largely limited to this type of literature, the reader must consider our estimate of the level of source dependency in *The Desire of Ages* as conservative.<sup>5</sup>

In practical terms, this conclusion declares that one is not able to recognize in Ellen White's writings on the life of Christ any general category of content or catalog of ideas that is unique to her. We found source parallels for theological, devotional, narrative, descriptive, and spiritual materials, whether in reference to biblical or extrabiblical content.

Ever since the recent surfacing of the issue of Ellen White's literary borrowing, the question How much? has had center stage. Adventists have tended to emphasize the uniqueness, the originality, of the content of Ellen White's writings. But in an ultimate spiritual sense Ellen White always insisted that her works were derivative. She received the information from which she wrote out her views through visions, through some sort of impression upon the mind, and from Scripture. She saw herself as a messenger of the Lord. I believe the issue that concerned her was the authority and truth of her messages—not their originality. For Ellen White, all truth ultimately originates with God.

This second conclusion suggests some areas for fruitful study. Even though we found parallels to sources in all of the types of the DA materials, perhaps we need to make a serious comparison of the content of the parallels and that of the independent sections.<sup>6</sup> And it may be that we will find other distinctions when we study the other books published from her writings on the life of Christ—*Christ's Object Lessons* and *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*.

We also need to look at the content of her visions. Did she leave any record—what she saw and when—that would enable us to identify the vision content independent of her commentary on the life of Christ that exhibits the use of sources? And what about those times when she was impressed to write? Did she have revelatory experiences other than what is generally understood as a vision? Would the use of sources play any role in such experiences?

There is also the matter of plagiarism. We have now identified several of the sources she used. We know the types of literature these sources represent. And

we have an idea of the nature and extent of Ellen White's literary dependency at the level of her original writings. With all this data at hand, we should be able to examine the issue of plagiarism in terms of the literary conventions that governed the use of such religious works among her contemporaries.

### 3. The special character of Ellen White's commentary is to be found in its practical use of Scripture and in its stress on spiritual realities and personal devotion.

Though Ellen White's writings appear to have been largely derivative, they do not lack originality. A fair assessment of the evidence should not deny or underplay the degree of her dependence, but neither should it overlook or depreciate her independence. Despite her lack of formal education and her dependence upon literary sources and literary assistants, Ellen White could write. She obviously had the ability to express her thoughts clearly. She was not slavishly dependent upon her sources, and the way she incorporated their content clearly shows that she recognized the better literary constructions. She knew how to separate the wheat from the chaff.

It may not be possible to identify Ellen White's "fingerprint" in the material that Marian Davis edited, but certain features of her work are readily apparent. She did not approach the biblical text as a scholarly exegete. Rather, she approached it from a practical point of view, taking the obvious, almost literal, meaning. She gave Marian Davis the responsibility of deciding where the earlier publication needed improving. In some instances the revision included a change in the order of events to bring her writings into harmony with the text of Scripture.

Another distinct characteristic of her work is stress on what I have called "spiritual realities." She differed from her sources in the emphasis she gave to descriptions of the activities or viewpoints of God and His angels and of Satan and his angels. She appears to be much more informed and at home than her sources when discussing the "other world," the real though invisible world of the spiritual beings of the universe. Her concern for reality is also evident in her replacing the expressions of probability, supposition, and imagination found in the sources with factual accounts given in

the style of a reporter or eyewitness.

Ellen White's "signature" is also to be found in the proportion of commentary given to devotional, moral, or Christian appeals or lessons that usually appear at the end of a chapter. This feature would naturally fit the evangelistic purpose that motivated her writing on the life of Christ. It is among her devotional comments and throughout her presentation of what I have called "spiritual realities" that we are more likely to find her independent hand at work.

Ellen White's independence is also to be seen in her selectivity. The sources were her slaves, never her master. Future studies would do well to compare her text with that of the sources and to note how she selected, condensed, paraphrased, and in general rearranged much of the material she used.

Our study raised another question that merits further attention: Was Ellen White indebted to sources for her devotional or spiritual comments? We did find several parallels in one or two works of this type, but our research did not survey enough of these works to establish whether her apparent independence is owing to her originality or to the limits of our investigation. When we extend the survey of possible sources to sermons and devotional literature, we will be able to tell how accurate are our data on her independence and bring into sharper focus just how much of her sections of comment corresponds to or differs from the sources she used.

No doubt a thorough look at Ellen White's use of Scripture would also prove helpful. Is biblical interpretation today limited to her practical approach? Is there a place for careful exegesis? If there is more than one legitimate approach to the study of Scripture, should Ellen White's views control Adventist interpretation of Scripture?

Finally, regarding content, how do Ellen White's writings on the life of Christ compare among themselves? We can no longer ask either Ellen White or those who knew her to explain what she meant by what she wrote. To be fair to her and to avoid the misuse of her authority, we must be careful how we represent what she wrote and how we establish what her position on a given subject was. My study of her writings on the life of Christ has given me the impression that some of her views changed through time. The very fact that the DA text represents a revision of her ear-

lier work suggests that her writings form a textual tradition.

If continued investigation indicates that there is some development in her ideas, would it not suggest that her comments need to be considered in terms of "time and place" not only within her own life experience and textual tradition but with respect to the larger background of her times, both within and without the Adventist Church? Perhaps we need Adventist historians and/or the Ellen G. White Estate to provide introductions to her writings in similar fashion to what we find useful in studying the Old and New Testament writings. At any rate, we may not necessarily find her view by simply striking a harmony among all her writings on a given subject. Her latest view might well be a correction or at least a modification of an earlier position.

#### **4. Ellen White used a minimum of 23 sources of various types of literature, including fiction, in her writings on the life of Christ.<sup>7</sup>**

Actually, we have no way of knowing how many sources are represented in Ellen White's work on the life of Christ. In addition to the remaining 72 chapters of the DA text, there are two other books to review: *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* and *Christ's Object Lessons*. These 23 writers are sufficient, however, to answer the questions so many have asked: From what writers did Ellen White borrow? What kinds of books were they writing?

Space does not permit us to survey all 23 here. But there is no need to cover the entire lot, since many fall under the literary category of "Victorian lives of Christ." The books in this category were never intended to be biographies. Today they would probably be classified as historical fiction.

One obviously fictional account is Ingraham's *The Prince of the House of David*, a work that Albert Schweitzer referred to as one of the "'edifying' romances on the life of Jesus intended for family reading."<sup>8</sup> Ingraham cast his work as a collection of letters written by an eyewitness in Palestine to her father in Egypt.

William Hanna's popular work was designed to be "practical and devotional."<sup>9</sup> No wonder that parallels from Hanna are to be found in 13 of the 15 DA chapters we investigated.

The books in Ellen White's library at

## **We found that Ellen White's sources had used each other in the same way that she later used them.**

the time of her death appear to corroborate what her writings reveal. She read widely in works of differing literary type, theological perspective, and scholarly depth.

#### **5. Ellen White's literary assistants, particularly Marian Davis, are responsible for the published form of *The Desire of Ages*.**

The role of Ellen White's literary assistants was not a major concern of the study. But this subject cannot be entirely excluded from any serious attempt to treat her use of sources. Her method of writing inextricably involved the work of her secretaries, especially that of her "bookmaker." A significant part of the introduction to the research report covers this rather interesting side to Ellen White's literary work.

In her day she was no doubt known more for her public speaking than for her writing. She loved to speak, took every opportunity to speak, and was confident of her speaking ability. It was not that way with her writing. Though she felt the burden to write, her confidence in her ability as a writer was not strong. She knew that her education did not qualify her to write for publication.

The evidence suggests that she wrote day by day in her journals, moving from topic to topic as time and opportunity made it possible. No doubt she worked with one source for a while and then moved on to another source and another subject. These jottings would be copied and corrected for grammar, syntax, and spelling when she passed that journal



over to one of her secretaries. Several journals would be active at the same time.

From these collections her assistants would compose articles for Adventist journals. It appears that larger publications were produced from collections of materials gathered into a scrapbook. At least that seems to be the way the chapters for *The Desire of Ages* were compiled. Apparently her assistants at times developed manuscripts from journal entries. Several of the manuscripts consist mainly of excerpts from earlier writings and do not carry Ellen White's signature.

Our comparison of manuscripts with the finished text and our study of the

letters Ellen White and Marian Davis wrote that reveal the steps required for preparing the text for publication clearly show that Marian Davis had the liberty to modify sentence structure, to rearrange paragraphs, and to establish chapter length. Ellen White was more concerned about the general content of the book, the cost, and getting the material to the public as soon as possible. She also took a keen interest in the artwork used to illustrate her writings.

I found no evidence to indicate that Marian Davis was involved in the original composition of any Ellen White text. But without the original manuscripts it is difficult to prove that such did not happen with any portion of the

text of *The Desire of Ages*. It might prove helpful to make a stylistic study of the letters of Marian Davis and the handwritten materials of Ellen White. If their "fingerprints" emerge, we would have some basis for determining more precisely the level of involvement Marian Davis exercised in her role as "book-maker." It may well be that she deserves some public recognition for her services in this regard.

As a final statement on the research project, I think it is fair to say that in respect to the text of *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White was both derivative and original. Future studies will no doubt bring to our attention not only more sources but also a greater understanding

## Personal postscript

Some of the questions I have been asked about this investigation relate to matters of faith and to my perspectives as an Adventist. Because I view myself as both a pastor and a scholar, I would like to answer briefly four of these questions. The following remarks constitute my personal response to what I have discovered and are not conclusions formed from the research data.

**1. "If you believe that Ellen White was inspired of God, why are you spending so much time searching out possible sources for her writings?"**

There are several reasons. The study is justified on the basis of Adventist interest—many in the church are asking about her literary dependency. No faith in Ellen White and her writings can be persuasive if it cannot stand the light of truth. Several friends of mine, and I am told many others unknown to me, have given up faith in Ellen White's inspiration, if not in Adventism, over this issue. If there are those who find it no longer possible to believe in Ellen White or Adventism, I would prefer that their decision be based upon a proper understanding rather than a misconception.

There is also a professional basis for my interest in this subject. As a biblical scholar I am aware that our knowl-

edge of Scripture is largely owing to similar studies on the biblical text, its composition, its history, and its background. In my view, it is imperative that we develop the knowledge and tools for properly interpreting the writings of Ellen White. These principles must emerge from a knowledge of the text and not be superimposed on the text.

**2. "Do you think that Ellen White was guilty of plagiarism, as some have charged?"**

As I pointed out in my report, the investigation did not treat the issue of plagiarism. While we cannot settle that issue here, nor do I wish to minimize its importance, my *personal opinion* is that she was not guilty of this practice. We did find verbatim quotes from authors who were not given credit. But the question of plagiarism is much more complicated than simply establishing that one writer used the work of another without giving credit. A writer can only be legitimately charged with plagiarism when that writer's literary methods contravene the established practices of the general community of writers producing works of the same literary genre within a comparable cultural context.

In the process of doing our research we found that Ellen White's sources had previously used each other in the same way that she later used them. At times the parallels between the sources were so

strong that we had difficulty deciding which one Ellen White was using.

**3. "How do you harmonize Ellen White's use of sources with her statements to the contrary? Do you think the introductory statement to *The Great Controversy* constitutes an adequate admission of literary dependency?"**

I must admit at the start that in my judgment this is the most serious problem to be faced in connection with Ellen White's literary dependency. It strikes at the heart of her honesty, her integrity, and therefore her trustworthiness.

As of now I do not have—nor, to my knowledge, does anyone else have—a satisfactory answer to this important question. The statement from *The Great Controversy* comes rather late in her writing career and is too limited in its reference to historians and reformers. Similar admissions do not appear as prefaces to all her writings in which sources are involved, and there is no indication that this particular statement applies to her writings in general.

But it seems to me that the statement from *The Great Controversy* does provide a hint as to where the answer will be found. Apparently Ellen White believed that documentation was necessary only when a writer was quoted as an authority. When the source was quoted to provide "a ready and forcible presentation of the



of Ellen White's creative role. With the aid of her literary assistants, she built out of the common quarry of stone not a replica of another's work but rather a customized literary composition that reflects the particular faith and Christian hope that she was called to share with her fellow Adventists and the Christian community at large.

It is perhaps more accurate and useful to speak of her creative and independent use of her writings and those of others than to minimize her dependence upon the writings of others. Whether sentence, paragraph, chapter, or book, it is the finished product that should be considered in the final analysis. A reading of the full report will readily reveal that the

multiple aspects of literary dependence or independence, particularly of large portions of text, are often too subtle, too intertwined, and otherwise too complex to be precisely and consistently evaluated. ■

<sup>1</sup> See the first article in this series: *Ministry*, October 1990.

<sup>2</sup> I do not claim that her secretaries did not borrow from the sources. My point is that I found no evidence that they composed the text using literary sources, and there is plenty of evidence in Ellen White's manuscripts to show that she did so.

<sup>3</sup> See "Personal Postscript" for the reference of the statement from *The Great Controversy* on this question.

<sup>4</sup> See questions 5, 6, and 7 in the first article in this series, "The Desire of Ages Project: the Data," *Ministry*, October 1990.

<sup>5</sup> For example, chapter 56, "Blessing the Children," includes much comment on motherhood, fatherhood, and the family. Until we survey the literature that we know Ellen White read on such topics, we cannot be sure that the sentences of this chapter actually deserve the independent rating we have given them.

<sup>6</sup> For a good example of a content analysis, see Tim Poirier's "Sources Clarify Ellen White's Christology," *Ministry*, December 1989, pp. 7-9.

<sup>7</sup> The summary statement in the first article listed 28 writers and 32 sources for both the DA and pre-DA texts. I came up with the number 23 by omitting the duplications between the two textual surveys and, in an effort to be sure that we had bona fide sources, by eliminating from the count all sources providing less than five parallels for any given chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. and C. Black, Ltd., 1910), p. 328, note 1.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel L. Pals, *The Victorian "Lives" of Christ* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1982), p. 69.

subject," no credit need be given.\*

The idea that Ellen White worked with these distinctions in mind does not settle the question of plagiarism. Nor does it fully answer the questions raised in connection with the DA text, in which paraphrases rather than quotations dominate. It does suggest, however, that Ellen White may have viewed literary dependency as primarily indicating authority and applying to wholesale quotations rather than to paraphrasing.

If my guess is correct, answering the question would demand that we carefully study her responses on the topic of literary dependency in their historical context. This approach would include a scrutiny of her comments and those of her contemporaries on the subject of inspiration. If so many believers today find her use of sources disturbing to their faith in her inspiration, is it reasonable to expect less of nineteenth-century Adventists? Ellen White's denials and/or nonadmissions may have meant something other to her than what they mean to us today.

4. "Do you personally believe that Ellen White was an inspired messenger of the Lord? And if so, what do you mean by 'inspiration'?"

This fourth and final question is the "bottom line" when it comes to questions on Ellen White. Even though there

is no single orthodox Adventist view of inspiration, whether of the authors of Scripture or of Ellen White, there are boundaries to acceptable positions. My personal position relative to Ellen White is informed primarily by my knowledge of the biblical text and secondarily by what I know about Ellen White and her writings.

While I do not have all the answers to the questions being addressed to the writings of Ellen White, my belief in her inspiration is not seriously compromised. After all, we don't have all the answers to questions on the text of Scripture.

I have no problem with inspired writers using sources. To my way of thinking, inspiration is not dependent upon originality. Much of Scripture makes no claim to being new and different from what anyone else was saying or from what had been said in the past. Why should we expect from Ellen White something more than we find in Scripture?

Actually, as a result of my reading many of her writings in their handwritten and typescript form, I find that my respect for and appreciation of Ellen White and her ministry have grown. I covet for her supporters and critics alike the opportunity to read her writings in their original context. To be able to experience firsthand her breadth of interest and involvement, her judgment and devotion, her humor and humaneness, and

her piety and spirituality, was both informative and faith-building.

Obviously she was human, had personal and character weaknesses, and was far from perfect and infallible. She never claimed otherwise. In my judgment, her writings contain both time-conditioned and timeless statements. These have to be sorted out through principles of interpretation, as is done with Scripture.

I am under the strong conviction, now more than before I began this research, that the issue is not one of deciding if Ellen White was a prophet or merely a religious leader. It is not a case of all or nothing, of either/or. Nor is it the problem of deciding which of her messages are inspired or when she exchanged her prophetic hat for an editorial cap.

I find compelling reasons for viewing her as a nineteenth-century prophetic voice in her ministry to the Adventist Church and to the larger society as well. Her voice out of that Christian community of the past still deserves to be heard today in those timeless messages that speak to the realities of our world at the end of the twentieth century. —Fred Veltman.

\*Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. xii.

# Olson discusses the Veltman study

**Robert W. Olson reflects on the Veltman study of *The Desire of Ages* and, more broadly, on our understanding and use of Ellen White's writings in general.**



Robert W. Olson, Th.D., who retired this past summer, was the secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate during the time the Veltman study was carried out.



David C. James, an associate editor of *Ministry*, interviewed Olson about the Veltman Study.

**A**

re you satisfied with the validity of the Veltman study? Do you have any questions about the methodology Veltman used?

I am totally satisfied with this study. No one could have done a better job—no one. He did it as a neutral person would have and not as one who is an apologist.

Veltman says that a minimum of 30 percent of *The Desire of Ages* is to some degree dependent. Do you agree with that figure?

I don't think your wording expresses it accurately. In 31 percent of the sentences *one word* or more shows some degree of dependency. But of course if what she did was wrong, it wouldn't matter whether it involved 90 percent or 10 percent of what she wrote.

**What does this study mean to our understanding of inspiration in general and Ellen White's inspiration in particular?**

Because of the studies of the past 10 or 12 years we have a much better understanding of how Ellen White did her writing than we did earlier. W. C. White and Dorcas Robinson tried to explain this to our people in 1933. In our White Estate files we have a document, "Brief Statements Regarding the Writings of Ellen G. White," that they wrote and offered for sale at that time. In that document they state that Ellen White had been told by the Lord that she would find precious gems of truth in the writings of others, and that the Holy Spirit would

help her to recognize these and to draw them into her writings so they would be preserved.

**How should we interpret Ellen White's writings now that we are aware of her use of sources?**

Well, it is simply the method that the Holy Spirit used. Inspiration doesn't require originality. Read Luke 1:1-4. Luke didn't say that anything in his Gospel was original. He said that he wrote in order that Theophilus might know what the truth was, what to believe. It wasn't new, but it was true. Now we know that the same thing can be said of Ellen White's writings.

Your question was how this would affect our interpretation of her writings. Well, no differently than it affects our interpretation of the Gospel of Luke. That she used sources doesn't mean that she was any less inspired than if she hadn't; we simply know that she had help—and she was always looking for help in phrasing things.

**In this study Veltman speaks of Ellen White's "factualizing" the original writers' speculations. I understand this to mean that as those authors wrote of an incident, they said, "Perhaps it happened this way." Then when Ellen White wrote of it, she said it indeed happened that way. Was she just confirming what she had seen of others' speculations?**

Yes, I think so. But let's remember that Veltman doesn't say that she confirmed all of their speculations. She was selective. That's the important thing.

I studied a chapter that Veltman did

not cover—the chapter “Lazarus, Come Forth,” on the resurrection of Lazarus. In that chapter I found at least 24 extrabiblical points that were mentioned by the 10 authors I examined. Ellen White discussed 15 of these points. In five cases she stood completely alone, opposing what these other authors had said. For example, she wrote that Lazarus died after the messenger returned to Bethany, not before the messenger returned. Here she differed with Edersheim, Abbot, Farrar, Hannah, March, and McMillan. She was the only one to make that statement.

So where she took their speculations and wrote them as firm, as true, she did so selectively. She wasn't copying wholesale and endorsing everything.

**Wouldn't it be reasonable to say that perhaps God used this method in part because of Ellen White's limited education? Maybe she used these other authors to compensate for her lack of education, and maybe God worked with her by showing her which parts to use and which to ignore.**

Yes, I think so. But I would not state that Ellen White was infallible in the decisions she made along this line. There are instances in her writings in which she differed with herself. I have to say I just don't have an explanation for that kind of thing. I simply will not claim too much.

Consequently I don't want to prove all of history, for example, by what Ellen White has written. Her main purpose in writing was not to present historical facts, either biblical or otherwise. Her main purpose was always evangelistic. She was always a soul winner. She was always a homiletician. She was always a pastor. She was always trying to bring people to the foot of the cross.

So, for instance, in one place she says that the Tower of Babel was built before the Flood.<sup>1</sup> Well, in *Patriarchs and Prophets* that's corrected. You will find that kind of thing—occasionally she differs with herself. We have to acknowledge fallibility. It's there.

[At this point Olson looked at the list of questions we had given him before the interview and brought up one we had skipped.]

You asked about changes in chronology—differences in the chronology of the life of Christ as presented in the pre-*Desire of Ages* and *Desire of Ages* texts owing to influence of sources. We know exactly why she used the chronology that

she did, because Marian Davis tells us. Marian says, “In the order of chapters we followed Samuel Andrews' harmony as given in his *Life of Christ*.” That's why any changes were made that were made. No inspiration connected with such changes. I should say, no divine directive from the Lord telling her “This is the chronology.”

When I taught Life and Teachings at Pacific Union College I used *The Desire of Ages* to establish the sequence, the way it all happened. I wouldn't do that today. Now I know that they were following Samuel Andrews. *The Desire of Ages* may not contain a perfect chronology. I don't think the Lord is that concerned about giving one to us. If He had been, Luke 4 and Matthew 4 would not differ on the three temptations in the wilderness.

**Do you think there are times when she wrote with the purpose of interpreting a particular text or establishing either biblical history or church history?**

I think that there were times when she was an exegete, but those instances are extremely rare. I think usually she was a homiletician. She used Scripture as an evangelist would.

For example, take John 5:39. She used that text in two ways, following different translations. She used the King James Version's imperative: “Search the scriptures [and you will have eternal life].” And she also quoted the Revised Version's indicative: “Ye search the scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life [but you'd learn of Me if you read them right].”

She used two different translations of the same verse, and they really have opposite ideas in them. Now, if she was willing to do that with John 5:39, then I know that she was not necessarily trying to give me an exegesis of a verse when she quoted it. Rather, she was drawing a spiritual lesson from it.

**So you would see the suggestion that Ellen White's writings comprise an “inspired commentary on Scripture” as true only in a limited way rather than as a general rule?**

We cannot use Ellen White as the determinative final arbiter of what Scripture means. If we do that, then she is the final authority and Scripture is not. Scripture must be permitted to interpret itself.

**In the article that contains his conclusions, Veltman suggests that Ellen White's writings may form a type of textual tradition—that her later writings may differ somewhat from her earlier writings. Do you think that is true? If so, should we give more weight to her later writings?**

I consider the later writings to be more precise—more accurate—than some of her earlier ones. I don't like to talk about mistakes in inspired writings. There are mistakes in the Bible, but whenever I mention it in a public forum of any kind I feel uncomfortable about doing it. I don't like to talk about mistakes in Ellen White, either; I'd rather concentrate on that which builds faith. But to answer your question, there are some discrepancies there. I mentioned a while ago the one about the Tower of Babel.

**Maybe a key for handling the mistakes is looking at the purpose for which the material was written. Does it occur in material that is merely supportive or illustrative? It is the point that she was attempting to make that is of concern, and whether the supporting material, the illustration, the means of conveying that point, is actually completely accurate is not the real issue.**

I agree with you 100 percent on that, and I think most of the White Estate staff would do the same. We believe that her counsel is always good to follow. I have never yet found one example of where you would suffer in any way by following her counsel. I've always found that you would benefit. Now, the rationale that she gives for the counsel may not always be absolutely and precisely correct. But we can't find fault with the counsel itself.

**Let's move on to the question of Ellen White's literary assistants. Veltman says that “Ellen White's literary assistants, particularly Marian Davis, are responsible for the published form of *The Desire of Ages*.” Do you agree with that statement?**

Yes, this is true. However, it should be made clear that Ellen White supervised Marian Davis; she examined and approved her work. Not one line was published without Ellen White's approval.

Marian Davis would sometimes change words. She would divide sentences because she realized that shorter sentences made a greater impact. She would eliminate repetition. She constructed the book in its present form.

Ellen White called Marian Davis her "bookmaker." Without her (or someone like her) we would never have had *The Desire of Ages* or *Steps to Christ* or *Christ's Object Lessons* or *The Ministry of Healing* or *Education* or *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*. In the case of all of these works, she selected key passages from Ellen White's writings and put them together in book form.

But Marian was very careful to state that she was only the editor, that's all. She took what Ellen White had written and created the book out of it.

In 1900 Ellen White wrote a letter to the president of the General Conference, Elder Irwin, that describes how her books were produced: "My copyists you have seen. They do not change my language. It stands as I write it.

"Marian's work is of a different order altogether. She is my bookmaker. . . . She takes my articles which are published in the papers, and pastes them in blank books. She also has a copy of all of the letters I write. In preparing a chapter for a book, Marian remembers that I have written something on that special point, which may make the matter more forcible. She begins to search for this, and if when she finds it, she sees that it will make the chapter more clear, she adds it.

"The books are not Marian's productions, but my own, gathered from all my writings. Marian has a large field from which to draw, and her ability to arrange the matter is of great value to me. It saves my poring over a mass of matter, which I have no time to do."<sup>2</sup>

Did Ellen White write any of her books following the process that you would normally think writing a book involves, in which you lay out the outline and then you write chapter 1, chapter 2, and so forth—each in sequence?

She never just sat down and wrote a book. I don't think she ever did that. I don't know of one example. The only possible candidates for that would be *Experience and Views* (1851)—her husband, I think, helped her put that together—and the four volumes of *Spiritual Gifts*. After that, beginning as early as 1870 with *Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 1, she had the help of literary assistants.

But note this. In a letter to W. C. White, Marian Davis wrote: "Sister White is constantly harassed with the thought that the manuscript should be

sent to the printers at once. I wish it were possible to relieve her mind, for the anxiety makes it hard for her to write and for me to work. . . . Sister White seems inclined to write, and I have no doubt she will bring out many precious things. I hope it will be possible to get them into the book. There is one thing, however, that not even the most competent editor could do—and that is prepare the manuscript before it is written."<sup>3</sup>

So it is clear, Marian Davis was only the editor. Ellen White had to write first, and then Marian picked that up—"Can I put it in here?" "Can I add something here?" etc.

**Veltman wrote of time-conditioned elements in Ellen White's writings. How do you view that?**

We recognize such elements in the Bible—for example, Paul's sending the slave Onesimus back to his owner. Why not in her writings? I don't believe it's the role of the White Estate to determine what is time-conditioned and what is not. That's up to individuals as they apply Ellen White's counsels to their lives.

I suppose this last question is the

**toughest: What about Ellen White's denials of literary borrowing?**

That's the only thing that I don't like about Fred's report. He mentions these denials but gives no examples. I feel like writing an article in which I mention every single denial and then from an apologist's standpoint give my view of them.<sup>4</sup>

There are some problems in Ellen White's writings—that's a fact. And I do not have a totally satisfying answer to all of them, but I'm willing to give her the benefit of the doubt when necessary. I recognize in her ministry God at work. A lifetime of intimate connection with the work of Ellen White has convinced me that she was a true prophet in the highest sense—as real a prophet as Elijah or Nathan or Agabus. So if there are some things I can't explain—well, I'll have to wait until the Lord comes and get the explanation then. ■

<sup>1</sup> *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 301.

<sup>2</sup> From the White Estate booklet "How *The Desire of Ages* Was Written," pp. 40, 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> The editors of *Ministry* have invited Dr. Olson to write this article, and plan to publish it in our February 1991 issue.

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